

APPLICATION

OF

DANIEL CORRIERI

FOR

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ON

COMINBINATION FOOD AND BEVERAGE PLATE

Sheets of Drawings: 4

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COMBINATION FOOD AND BEVERAGE PLATE

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of Invention

The present invention relates generally to food and beverage plates and trays, and, more particularly, to a new combination food and beverage plate that permits a user to simultaneously hold food and beverage containers with a single hand.

Background Description

The present invention relates generally to a solution to the problem of simultaneously holding food and beverage containers at social events. At many social events, persons are provided with food and with beverages, but are not provided with adequate seating or surfaces upon which to rest their food plates or beverage containers. Thus, a person is required to attempt to simultaneously juggle a food plate and a beverage container. With both hands occupied by food plates and beverage containers, it is difficult, if not impossible, to eat, drink, and greet other guests.

Some prior art plates and trays attempt to provide combination units for simultaneously holding both food items and beverage containers. In many of the prior art combination units, the beverage holder is a molded piece of the combination unit. In this regard, many of the prior art beverage holders are limited as to the size and shape of beverage containers which they will accommodate. For instance, U.S. Patent No. 6,446,828 to *Casteel* provides a one piece integrally molded serving tray and beverage holder, in which the beverage holder is a molded piece of plastic, and is limited as to the size and shape of beverage containers that it will securely hold. Moreover, the depth of the *Casteel* combination unit is not particularly suitable for economically stacking and packaging the units. U.S. Patent No. 3,498,470 to *Thomas* illustrates another common problem with prior art beverage holders, wherein the beverage holder is too shallow, such that the beverage

containers are not securely held and may easily tip over or become disengaged from the combination unit.

A further problem with prior art combination units is that they may require the use of a secondary plate. For instance, U.S. Patent No. 5,950,856 to *Cinque* teaches that a recessed portion of the combination unit is used to receive and hold a plate. Designs which require the use of a secondary plate are not completely integrated and thus require the expenditure of additional monies and assembly for use. Moreover, combination units such as the *Cinque* design are not intended to be disposable.

One of the greatest problems with prior art combination units is the mechanism by which they are intended to be held. Many prior art combination units teach that a portion of the hand or arm must be positioned through or about the unit. For instance, U.S. Patent No. 6,129,235 to *Creske*, U.S. Patent No. 5,323,910 to *Van de Graaf, Jr.*, and U.S. Patent No. 5,429,266 to *D'Oliveira et al.* teach that a person must position their thumb through a hole to support the combination unit. For many users, the positioning of their thumb through a hole in the combination unit may feel constricting or uncomfortable. Further, such positioning does not enable a person to quickly and easily pick-up or put-down the combination unit.

Other prior art combination units require a user to hold a grip or handle on the underside of the combination unit. For instance, the *Cinque* design teaches that the cup holder is also the handle by which the combination unit should be held. Similarly, U.S. Patent No. 6,264,026 to *Bradley* provides a hand grip in addition to a cup holder for gripping with a person's hand. The *Bradley* design and U.S. Patent No. 5,346,070 to *McSpadden* further disclose that a person's forearm is used to stabilize and support the combination unit. A drawback of having a hand grip on the underside of the combination unit is that the depth of the unit is increased. These bulky units are not practical or desirable for use at a party, or for stacking, washing and storage. A further problem with units having underside grips or handles is that the handle or grip may be inadequate to securely grip and hold the combination unit with ease and comfort.

Finally, a major drawback of prior art combination units is that they are not ergonomically or aesthetically pleasing in shape. For instance, the *Cinque* design and the design of U.S. Patent No. 4,989,742 to *Powell* have an enlarged plate portion which produces a lop-sided appearance and weight distribution. Similarly, the kidney-shaped designs of *Bradley* and *McSpadden* having multiple indentions in the surfaces, and the irregularly-shaped design of U.S. Design Patent No. 376,297 to *Jacobson*, are not particularly

aesthetically pleasing. Thus, many of the prior art combination units lack the appearance and functionality of plates or platters. Instead, many of the prior art combination units have the appearance of movie-theater or television-type snack trays, with multiple compartments, irregular shapes and significant depth. These designs are not reminiscent of conventional plates and dinnerware, are not visually pleasing, and are not easily washed, stacked or packaged.

Thus, a heretofore unaddressed need exists in the industry to address the limitations associated with conventional combination food and beverage plates by providing a combination food and beverage plate which permits a person to hold both the food and beverage containers in one hand, thus providing a 'free' hand with which the person may eat, drink or greet other guests. Moreover, a combination food and beverage plate is needed which will accommodate and function equally as well for persons who are left-handed or right-handed and which is visually pleasing. The combination food and beverage plate of the present invention provides a unique, aesthetically pleasing, and easy to use combination plate.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Briefly, and in general terms, the present invention encompasses a combination food and beverage plate for supporting food and beverage containers with a single hand. More particularly, by way of example only and not necessarily by way of limitation, a preferred embodiment of the present invention provides a combination plate comprising a first section, having at least one recessed compartment, and a second section, having at least one beverage holder or aperture and at least one gripping aperture. In a preferred embodiment, the recessed compartment is utilized for containing food items, the beverage aperture is utilized for engaging beverage containers of various sizes and shapes, and the grip aperture is utilized by a person to grip and hold the combination plate in a single hand.

A preferred embodiment of the present invention provides a plate rim that connects to and slopes upward from the recessed compartment of the combination plate. In this regard, the plate rim aids in containing food items within the recessed compartment. The plate rim also defines the periphery shape of the combination plate, and although the shape of the combination plate may vary, an elliptical shape is preferred.

A further preferred embodiment of the present invention provides a support rim that defines the configuration of the beverage aperture and the grip aperture of the second

section. Preferably, the beverage aperture has a circular configuration, and beverage containers are received and held within the beverage aperture about the midsection of the beverage container. In a preferred embodiment, the beverage aperture is further configured with a slot in a portion of the support rim that defines the beverage aperture. The slot aids in receiving differently sized and shaped beverage containers within the beverage aperture. For example, and not by way of limitation, since the slot will flex a certain amount, the beverage aperture is capable of receiving beverage containers of various diameters. The slot further aids in receiving differently shaped beverage containers. For example, and not by way of limitation, beverage containers having a stem and a wider top and bottom, such as but not limited to a wine glass, may be held within the beverage aperture in that the stem may be passed through the slot and the body of the stemmed container may then rest upon the top of the support rim of the beverage aperture. The beverage aperture also preferably includes a tapered sleeve that extends down from the support rim. By angling slightly inward, the tapered sleeve aids in securely holding beverage containers, particularly cylindrical beverage containers, within the beverage aperture.

The combination plate of the present invention also preferably includes a semi-circular shaped grip aperture. The shape of the grip aperture is defined by the support rim and an opening in the support rim. The opening in the support rim for the grip aperture is of sufficient dimension to accommodate a person's hand. In this regard, a person may engage his hand into the grip aperture and support the combination food and beverage plate with a single hand. In a preferred embodiment, a grip aperture is provided on either side of the beverage aperture, such that a person may hold the combination plate equally well with either his left or right hand.

In a further preferred embodiment, the grip aperture may also function to receive and hold stemmed beverage containers having a small diameter, such as but not limited to, champagne glasses. In this regard, the stem of the beverage container is inserted in through the opening of the grip aperture and the body of the stemmed beverage container rests on the top of support rim of the grip aperture.

As more and more food items and beverage containers are added to the combination plate, the weight and strain on the plate increases. A preferred embodiment of the combination plate therefore further comprises a reinforcing underside to the plate. That is, a reinforcing underside or thickness is configured to reinforce the recessed food compartment, the beverage aperture and the grip aperture. Moreover, the combination plate is planar, such that it may be easily washed, stacked and packaged.

A preferred embodiment of the present combination food and beverage plate comprises a plate which is manufactured of a material, such as but not limited to plastic, so that the plate may either be washed and reused or may be disposed of after a single use. In another preferred embodiment, the combination plate is manufactured of a single use material, such as but not limited to paper. Additionally, since in preferred embodiment the combination plate may be reused, the first section of the combination plate is configured to engage a secondary plate, such as but not limited to a paper plate, so that food items do not directly contact the combination plate. In this regard, the present invention provides the benefit holding both food and beverage containers with a single hand, as well as the benefit of a plate that is suitable for either reuse or disposal after a one-time use.

Most commonly, the present invention will be embodied in a plastic combination plate, having an elliptical shape with a single recessed food compartment, a single slotted beverage aperture, and two grip apertures on either side of the beverage aperture for holding the combination plate. However, different combination plate configurations are envisioned.

Other features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent to one skilled in the art upon examination of the following detailed description when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. It is intended that all such features and advantages be included herein within the scope of the present invention and protected by the claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention can be better understood with reference to the following drawings. The present invention is illustrated in the figures of the accompanying drawings which are meant to be exemplary and not limiting, in which like references are intended to refer to like or corresponding parts, and in which:

FIG. 1 is a top perspective view of a combination food and beverage plate for supporting food and beverage containers with a single hand of a person, showing a first section, wherein the first section comprises a recessed food compartment and a plate rim, and showing a second section, wherein the second section comprises a beverage aperture, two grip apertures and a support rim;

FIG. 2 is a bottom perspective view of a combination food and beverage plate illustrating the reinforcing underside of the plate, two grip apertures, and a beverage aperture;

FIG. 3 is a top perspective view of one embodiment, according to the present

invention, showing engagement of the grip aperture with a person's hand and showing a stemmed beverage container received and held within the beverage aperture; and

FIG. 4 is a perspective side view of one embodiment, according to the present invention, showing engagement of the grip aperture with a person's hand and showing a cylindrical beverage container received and held within the beverage aperture.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Having summarized the invention above, reference is now made in detail to the description of the invention as illustrated in the drawings. While the invention will be described in connection with these drawings, there is no intent to limit the invention to the embodiment or embodiments disclosed therein. In fact, those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate upon reading the present specification and viewing the present drawings that various modifications and variations can be made. The intent is to cover all alternatives, modifications and equivalents included within the spirit and scope of the invention, as defined by the appended claims.

Referring now to the drawings, wherein the reference numerals denote like or corresponding parts throughout the drawing figures and, more particularly to Fig. 1, shown is a combination food and beverage plate 10 for simultaneously supporting food and beverage containers with a single hand of a person. The combination food and beverage plate is comprised of a first section 12 for containing food items and a second section 14 for supporting beverage containers and gripping the combination plate 10.

As shown in Fig. 1, within the first section 12, a recessed compartment 16 is provided in which food items may be placed. Although only a single recessed compartment 16 is shown, it is envisioned that more than one recessed compartment may be configured in the first section 12 of the combination plate 10. It is envisioned that the recessed compartment 16 may be configured with flattened, curved or sloping edges that join with a plate rim 18. In a preferred embodiment, the recessed compartment 16 slopes upward in part and is perpendicular in part to the plate rim 18 and the second section 14. In this regard, the plate rim 18 defines the periphery and shape of the recessed compartment 16 and the first section 12.

Referring again to Fig. 1, the second section 14 comprises at least one beverage aperture 22, at least one grip aperture 20 and a support rim 24. The support rim 24 defines the beverage aperture 22 and the grip aperture 20 of the second section 14. The first section 12 and the second section 14 are connected along a plane where the support rim 24

and the plate rim 18 meet. In this regard, in a preferred embodiment, the connected first section 12 and second section 14 together comprise a planar elliptical shape of the combination plate. In other preferred embodiments, the shape of the combination plate 10 is not elliptical; but is instead circular or multi-sided, such as but not limited to, a planar triangular, square, or hexagonal shape. The planar shape aids in washing, stacking and packaging the combination plates.

As shown in Fig. 1, the support rim 24 defines a circular configuration for the beverage aperture 22 and defines a semi-circular configuration for the grip apertures 20. Beverage containers are received and held within the beverage aperture 22, being preferably held about the midsection of the beverage container. The beverage aperture 22 is configured to receive and hold beverage containers with a cylindrical, conical or stemmed shape by sliding a beverage container into the beverage aperture 22 until the beverage container is firmly held within the beverage aperture 22 or the body of the beverage container is resting upon the top of the beverage aperture 22 that is formed by the support rim 24.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a slot 26 is provided within the portion of the support rim 24 that defines the beverage aperture 22. It is envisioned in other preferred embodiments, however, that the beverage aperture 22 may not be slotted. The slot 26 aids in receiving differently sized and shaped beverage containers within the beverage aperture 22. For example, since the slot 22 is configured to permit the beverage aperture 22 to flex a certain amount, the beverage aperture 22 is capable of receiving beverage containers of various diameters. The slot 26 further aids in receiving differently shaped beverage containers into the beverage aperture 22. For example, and not by way of limitation, beverage containers having a stem and a wider top and bottom, such as but not limited to a wine glass, may be held within the beverage aperture 22. That is, the stem of the wine glass beverage container is passed through the slot 26 and the body of the stemmed container is rested upon the top of the beverage aperture 22 that is formed by the support rim 24. The beverage aperture 22 also preferably includes a tapered sleeve 20 that extends down from the support rim 24. The tapered sleeve 30 is angled slightly inward towards the center of the beverage aperture 22, thereby aiding in securely holding cylindrical or conical beverage containers within the beverage aperture.

Also shown in Fig. 1, is a preferred embodiment wherein two grip apertures 20 are provided in the combination plate 10, and the grip apertures 20 are configured to either side of the beverage aperture 22. The grip apertures 20 are preferably semi-circular in configuration and are defined by the support rim 24 and an opening 28 in the support rim 24.

In a preferred embodiment, the opening 28 is configured with sufficient dimension to permit engagement of a person's hand in the grip aperture 20. That is, a person's hand will preferably engage the grip aperture 20 such that the thumb is on the top side of the combination plate 10 and the remainder of the person's hand is supporting the combination plate 10 from the bottom. It is envisioned, that the present invention may be configured with only one grip aperture 20 or with more than two grip apertures 20. Further, it is envisioned that the grip apertures 20 may be positioned outside of the second section 14 of the combination plate 10. Moreover, in a further preferred embodiment, it is envisioned that the grip aperture 20 is configured with a shape and opening 28 other than semi-circular.

Additionally, the grip aperture 20 is configured to receive and hold stemmed beverage containers that have a narrow diameter. By way of example, and not by way of limitation, champagne glasses which are typically too narrow to be received and held by the beverage aperture 22 can be received by the grip aperture 20 and held in place by resting the bottom of the body of the narrow diameter stemmed beverage container upon the top of the grip aperture 20 that is formed by the support rim 24. In this regard, where two or more grip apertures 20 are provided, the combination plate 10 is capable of receiving and holding various types of commonly utilized beverage containers in either the beverage aperture 22 or the grip aperture 20, while still maintaining the functionality of holding the combination plate 10 in a single hand.

Referring now to Fig. 2, the reinforcing underside 32 of the combination plate 10 is shown. In a preferred embodiment, the reinforcing underside 32 of the combination plate 10 is configured with a thickness sufficient to reinforce the underside of the recessed compartment 16, the plate rim 18, the beverage aperture 22 and the grip aperture 20. It is envisioned that the thickness of the reinforcing underside 32 may vary across the plate, such that some areas of the combination plate 10 comprise more reinforcing material than other areas. Particularly, when the combination plate 10 is loaded with food items and beverage containers, the thickness of the reinforcing underside 32 provides stability and durability to the combination plate 10. The desired thickness of the reinforcing underside 32 that is sufficient to adequately reinforce the combination plate 10 will depend upon the material of the combination plate 10 and upon the nature of intended use. Also shown in Fig. 2, is a bottom perspective view of the tapered sleeve 30. The tapered sleeve 30 extends down from the support rim 24 and aids in receiving and holding variously shaped beverage containers within the beverage aperture 22.

Fig. 3 provides a top perspective view of the combination plate 10 as it is

preferably held by a person's hand using the grip aperture 20. When holding the combination plate 10 as preferably intended, a person's hand will engage the grip aperture 20 such that the thumb rests along the top of the plate rim 18, while the remainder of the hand supports the combination plate 10 along the underside of the plate rim 18 and the recessed compartment 16.

Also shown in Fig. 3, is a preferred embodiment where a stemmed beverage container is engaged by the beverage aperture 22. The stem of the beverage container is passed through the slot 26 in the support rim 24 of the beverage aperture 22 and the body of the beverage container rests upon the top of beverage aperture 22 that is formed by the support rim 24. The tapered sleeve 30, which extends down from the support rim 24 in the beverage aperture 22, aids in stabilizing and holding the stemmed beverage container in place in the beverage aperture 22.

Fig. 4 illustrates a perspective side view of the combination plate 10 showing engagement of a person's hand with the grip aperture 20 and a cylindrical beverage container held within the beverage aperture 22. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a person will grip and hold the combination plate 10 using only one hand. In this regard, the person's hand will engage the grip aperture 20 such that the thumb rests along the top of the combination plate 10 and the remainder of the person's hand rests along the bottom. In particular, the person may rest one or more fingers along the underside of the plate rim 18 and may rest one or more fingers along the underside of the recessed compartment 16. This preferred configuration provides support to the combination plate 10 and permits a person to easily hold the plate 10 with only one hand.

The combination plate 10 may be comprised of a variety of materials. In a preferred embodiment, the combination plate 10 is manufactured of a plastic material. In this regard, the combination plate 10 may be suitable for either a single use or for reuse. In another preferred embodiment, the combination plate 10 is manufactured of a paper material, wherein the paper material is suitable for a single use. It is envisioned, however, that almost any material that is suitable for food contact may be used in manufacturing the combination plate 10. Moreover, the combination plate 10 may be configured such that a secondary plate, such as but not limited to a disposable paper plate, may be placed on the recessed compartment. In this manner, the secondary plate is disposable, while the combination plate 10 is reused.

The many features and advantages of the invention are apparent from the detailed specification, and thus, it is intended by the appended claims to cover all such

features and advantages of the invention that fall within the true spirit and scope of the invention. Further, since numerous modifications and variations will readily occur to those skilled in the art, it is not desired to limit the invention to the exact construction and operation illustrated and described, and accordingly, all suitable modifications and equivalents may be resorted to, falling within the scope of the invention. While the foregoing invention has been described in detail by way of illustration and example of preferred embodiments, numerous modifications, substitutions, and alterations are possible without departing from the scope of the invention defined in the following claims. The embodiments discussed were chosen and described to provide the best illustration of the principles of the present invention and its practical application to thereby enable one of ordinary skill in the art to utilize the invention in various embodiments and with various modifications as are suited to the particular use contemplated. All such modifications and variations are within the scope of the invention as determined by the appended claims when interpreted in accordance with the breadth to which they are fairly and legally entitled.